

Memory Wars in the Post-Soviet Space

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Over the past year, the memory wars of the post-Soviet space have intensified. Nation-building in the region, like elsewhere, has long involved the creation of local historical narratives and the selection of national heroes, traitors, victories, sufferings, and “significant Others.” Recently, however, a new wave of memory wars has arisen in connection with official state efforts to resolve festering historical disputes.

In these disputes, Russia has been cast as keeper of the old, largely Soviet traditions, while many of its neighbors, fueled by a need to construct national identities as part of new nation-building projects, have attempted to amend or replace traditional narratives. Often, a new narrative is centered around a national tragedy, such as the great Ukrainian famine, known as the Holodomor, that killed millions of peasants in the early 1930s. In 2006, Ukraine adopted a law criminalizing the denial of the Holodomor, as well as the denial of its nature as a genocide. In Russia, which was also struck by deadly famine in the years of “collectivization,” the Ukrainian authorities’ claim that Soviet policy deliberately aimed to destroy the Ukrainian nation sounds avowedly anti-Russian.

Other historical disputes have also pitted post-Soviet states against Russia. The recent rehabilitation of Baltic and western Ukrainian national resistance heroes who were Nazi collaborators, along with an open gathering of SS veterans in Estonia and Latvia, deeply offended Russians, who cherish the notion that they saved Europe from the Nazis in World War II. Central European states have also challenged the idea that the Soviet Union helped liberate Europe. They instead promote the view that the USSR brought another form of totalitarianism to their nations. In doing so, they equate Joseph Stalin to Adolph Hitler, an analogy that most Russians reject.

While Russia's efforts to maintain the traditional postwar narrative have generally been defensive, a major shift has recently occurred. The Russian leadership has decided to promote their views on history with the same tools used by their neighbors, namely state interference and the criminalization of "wrong views" to defend the officially-sanctioned version of national identity. Ill-conceived, this policy shift has mobilized historians and civil right activists against it.

Ukraine and the Holodomor

The most animated clashes in the last year have occurred in Russian-Ukrainian relations. In August 2008, the deputy chief of staff of the Ukrainian presidential administration, Andrei Kislinskii, issued a statement in response to an academic conference scheduled to be held in early September in Kyiv called "Ukraine-Russia: Problems of Joint History." Kislinskii described the conference themes, including an "assessment of famine in the USSR," "revision of the results of the Second World War," and "problems of joint Russian-Ukrainian history teaching in educational institutions," as "provocative for Ukrainian society." Kislinskii accused organizers of receiving money from the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and linked the conference to the activities of a putative Ukrainian "fifth column." He also called the conference "a challenge to all national democratic forces." Several of the conference's planned speakers were already banned from entering Ukraine due to their "anti-Ukrainian activities," and Ukrainian authorities denied entry to Russian ideologue Sergei Markov when he came to participate.

In the fall of 2008, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko further politicized the Holodomor by inviting foreign leaders, including Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, to attend the 75th anniversary memorial ceremonies in Kyiv. While he did not go to Kyiv, Medvedev replied with a letter explaining, in detail, the Russian views on the Holodomor. In particular, Medvedev contended that the Holodomor and attempts to join NATO had become a "central element of Ukrainian foreign policy" and a "test for patriotism and loyalty." Medvedev further accused Yushchenko of using the tragedy to achieve political goals, highlighting the 2006 law codifying the "genocide against the Ukrainian people." Medvedev underlined that he did not defend Stalinist repression, but he could not agree to singling out the Ukrainian nation as a special victim, calling such an approach "cynical and immoral." The Russian president blamed Yushchenko for "seek[ing] to divide our peoples as much as possible, peoples united by many centuries of historical, cultural, and spiritual ties." Medvedev further asserted that the Russian authorities "don't want academics to take on political 'attitudes'" and invited Ukraine, along with Kazakhstan, Belarus, and other countries, to work on finding a common ground in their interpretation of these events.

Historical disputes were again invoked in the public letters Medvedev and Yushchenko exchanged in August 2009, when the Kremlin decided to postpone appointing an ambassador to Kyiv until after Ukraine's January 2010 presidential election.

Criminalization of Historical Views in Russia: First Steps

By this time, however, the Ukrainian initiative to make certain historical views criminally liable had already found its way into the minds of Russian politicians. On a visit to Volgograd on Defender of the Fatherland Day in 2009, one of the leaders of United Russia, Sergei Shoigu, suggested that criminal liability should be introduced for “denial of the victory of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War,” citing as precedent laws in some European states prohibiting denial of the Holocaust.

However, such an approach requires the establishment of a canon, and, soon, the discussion of new history textbooks began. In March 2009, President Medvedev met with Minister of Education and Science Andrei Fursenko to demand “control over presses” that publish history textbooks as a way to keep an eye on their contents.

On the eve of Victory Day, legislation was proposed to the Russian State Duma under the title “On Countering the Rehabilitation of Nazism, Nazi Criminals, and Their Accomplices in the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union.” The draft law included punishment by fine and 3 to 5 years in prison. It also proposed the creation of a special public commission to track pro-Nazi policies in neighboring states and to advise the reaction by Russian authorities. Those practicing revisionism would be denied entry to Russia and/or be put on trial in Russian courts. Polls show that a majority of the Russian population supported the move. Even the liberal (or semi-liberal) parties Yabloko and Pravoie Delo supported the draft, though they suggested the addition of another crime: the rehabilitation of Stalinism.

Ten days after the legislation was introduced, Medvedev implemented similar ideas in the form of presidential decree No. 549, which created a “Commission for Countering Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests.” In his video blog, Medvedev attacked differing versions of the Second World War, calling recent interpretations “increasingly tough, malicious, and aggressive,” and asserted a need to defend historical truth. The blog address was uploaded on the official presidential site with the text of the decree.

The decree established a commission of twenty-eight individuals, including professional historians and representatives of the State Duma and Public Chamber, as well as such agencies as the SVR, Federal Security Service (FSB), Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The commission’s responsibilities were to expose “falsifications of history detrimental to Russia” and elaborate measures to counteract them.

Reaction to the Decree

Historians and human rights activists reacted immediately to the decree. The executive director of the Russian nongovernmental organization For Human Rights, Lev Ponomarev, declared that the decree was, in its very essence, totalitarian. He said that the decree went beyond “standard authoritarian police measures, because it aimed at regulating a field that only totalitarian regimes dare to control.” Ponomarev claimed that it was written “in defense of Stalin’s policy and pro-Stalin historical mythology.” He expressed his hopes that the decree “would unite not only historians, but also civil

society, different ideological camps for whom the very idea of bureaucratic ideology and ideological censorship is unacceptable." Ponomarev called for the opening of archives and for a complete denunciation of the crimes of the Stalin regime.

The NGO Memorial also issued a special statement, offering its own list of what it considers historical falsifications, including the denial of an NKVD mass killing of Polish officers in Katyn and the assertion of a "military-fascist conspiracy" against Stalin in 1937. However, Memorial insisted that historical falsifications should be combated with "open and free academic discussions, including international ones." The state's role in the process is to ensure free and open access to archives but not to interfere in the content of historical studies. Memorial expressed deep concern that the commission would counteract not the falsification of history, but opinions, assessments, and concepts in disagreement with government policy. The group warned that such use of the commission's power would be unconstitutional.

An open letter against the decree and draft law was also published online by *Polit.ru* under the title "In a democratic society, freedom of history means freedom for all." It was signed by 221 prominent scholars, mostly historians, warning of the threat to freedom of speech posed by the two documents.

The new campaign against "falsifiers of history" also has its supporters, however. Academician and Public Chamber member Valery Tishkov imprudently sent a circular letter to the Russian Academy of Sciences in June 2009, requesting an "annotated list of historical-cultural falsifications." After the letter produced indignation among historians, Tishkov explained that he was planning to publish an article on the presidential decree and was merely gathering data, while his aide issued an explanation on the Academy of Sciences website calling for the professionalization of historical expertise.

Some enthusiasts, however, went further. Participating in a state grant competition, the Sholokhov Moscow State Humanitarian University proposed a project to produce an "annotated list of ... authors and falsifiers of history." The project was also going to produce an analytic paper addressed to the presidential administration "on countering falsifications at the state level." The proposal, however, was rejected.

The most sophisticated philosophical defender of the decree, Aleksander Dugin, demanded the creation of state axioms of history and the imprisonment of those who equate Stalin and Hitler. Dugin also asserted that the notion that "Stalin was a good guy" is Russia's "national myth," concealing the fact that the majority of the Russian population considers Stalin's rule to be criminal.

There were other important, though minor, results of the decree. Historians discovered that they needed to raise their professional expertise. In the most notable case, the official *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* (*Journal of Military History*) published an article in 2008 by military historian Colonel Sergei Kovalyov, who effectively blamed Poland for causing World War II by refusing to consent to "just" German demands in 1939. The journal's readership is limited, but as the issue of historical falsification gained prominence, the article was found, analyzed, severely criticized, and quickly deleted from the Ministry of Defense's website.

As mentioned, after Tishkov was criticized for his letter, his deputy, Andrei Petrov, published an explanation of the text on the Russian Academy of Science's website, in which he called for, among other things, the creation of professional historical expertise. Petrov stated, "In our society and in the decisionmaking system, there is a lack of mechanisms for scientific expertise. It is painfully felt by everyone, especially when decisions are made on problems related to history.... Too often the decision is made on political grounds, and only afterwards do scholars get consulted. I am sure that the reverse mechanism should exist."

International Challenges

In the midst of heated discussions about the presidential decree, the news of a related resolution by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reached Russia. In its July 2009 Vilnius Declaration, the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly included a resolution "On Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the 21st Century." While acknowledging "the uniqueness of the Holocaust," the resolution still equated "two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought about genocide, violations of human rights and freedoms, war crimes and crimes against humanity." The resolution also recalled the initiative of the European Parliament "to proclaim 23 August, when the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was signed 70 years ago, as a Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, in order to preserve the memory of the victims of mass deportations and exterminations" and expressed deep concern at the glorification of the totalitarian regimes.

The idea and language of the resolution were interpreted in Russia as an attempt not only to equate Stalin with Hitler, but to equate the Soviet army's liberation of Europe with the Nazi occupation. The first headline in the Russia media about the resolution was "OSCE equated USSR with Nazi Germany."

While the resolution probably reflected the Central European experience of the mid-twentieth century, Russia saw it as unjust and as a "falsification of history," thereby giving President Medvedev's initiative a new rationale. Soon, the two houses of the Russian parliament issued a special declaration on the OSCE resolution. They called the document "an insult to the memory of millions" who died for the liberation of Europe, and they argued against singling out August 23, 1939, without mentioning the Munich appeasement of 1938. The resolution was denounced as "an attempt to substitute results of the Second World War with the results of the Cold War" and to revise the decisions of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Leaders of the Russian parliament called for greater international responsibility against encroachment on the established historical memory of World War II.

In response, Memorial again issued a statement criticizing the parliament's response for its incorrect reading of the OSCE resolution. Memorial claimed that there was nothing in the resolution that could insult the soldiers who died while liberating Europe from Nazism, as "they were neither the property nor part" of Stalin's regime. Memorial insisted that the Nazi and Stalinist regimes could both be blamed for crimes against social, religious, and other communities, as well as entire nations. They again called on

the State Duma and Federation Council to open the archives from the Stalin era and, “instead of searching for nonexistent ‘anti-Russian attacks,’” to work with other European parliaments to promote public comprehension of the crimes of totalitarianism.

Conclusion

On July 13, 2009, former State Department official Liz Cheney began her *Wall Street Journal* commentary: “There are two different versions of the story of the end of the Cold War: the Russian version and the truth.” Perhaps unknowingly, her statement closely mirrored the view of the ideologues in the memory wars of the post-Soviet space. Going on, her words even more clearly suggest the reasons why those wars are waged with such fervor: “We can also be disarmed morally by a president who spreads false narratives about our history or who accepts, even if by his silence, our enemies’ lies about us.”

Each camp in the Eurasian space claims that it represents the only truth, while the others lie. Such an approach eliminates all room for dialogue. History is subject to interpretation, but interpretation based on the study of historical sources. Historians should research the complicated past, while politicians should strive for a peaceful future.

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